

Ministerial Absolution.

A SERMON

DELIVERED IN THE

Church of the Messiah,

PORT RICHMOND, PHILA., PA.

On Sunday Evening, July 12th, 1874,

By REV. JACOB MILLER,

RECTOR OF THE CHURCH.

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"And I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."—*Matt. xvi: 19.*

This declaration of our Lord to St. Peter was subsequently repeated to the other apostles in terms almost identical therewith: "Verily I say unto you, whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." And again, after His Resurrection, it was repeated in words of the same import, though the phraseology is changed: "whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them, and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." These are momentous words; and we cannot doubt that through them our Lord intended to convey to His disciples important truth, and to impress their minds therewith. Hence it becomes us to inquire into their true meaning as elucidated by other passages of the Holy Scriptures, and by their general bearing.

First, then, I shall endeavor to explain the meaning of the phrase "*Kingdom of Heaven*" as found in the text and in other parallel passages. It is that society which our Lord established here on earth for the purpose of guiding and instructing His people as preparatory to their translation to His Kingdom in glory. It is known among us as *the Church*, and is called the Kingdom of Heaven in the New Testament to denote its character

and object as training men for the employments and enjoyments of that higher state. Of this Kingdom the prophet Daniel had spoken in that remarkable prediction: "In the days of these kings shall the God of heaven set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed." And John the Baptist, as the forerunner of our Lord, commenced his preaching by announcing the immediate advent of the same kingdom, its visible establishment in the world: "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Its characteristics our Lord points out in several parables. Its *increase* and growth He describes in comparing it to a grain of mustard seed, which, though itself so small, yet becomes a large tree so that in its branches the fowls of the air may lodge. Its *diffusion* among the masses of mankind is likened to the leaven which is put into meal, and affects the entire mass: thus the leaven of the gospel is to work until it embraces that great multitude whom no man can number. *The character of those brought into the kingdom* is denoted by the parable of the net, which let down into the sea, gathered fish of every kind: thus the kingdom of heaven would gather in every description of persons, the worthless along with the better class, and perhaps even outnumbering the latter, until the sorting-time shall come, and then a separation shall be made. Here we see how false the notion is that we are to look for perfection in the members of the earthly church; or that we are to reject its claims because unworthy men have been found in it. As well might we say, we would have no civil government because it has not unfrequently been administered by bad men, and used as an instrument of oppression and tyranny. The Kingdom of Heaven, then, in the text, as well as in numerous other passages of the New Testament, means primarily that spiritual society which our Lord set up for the purpose of teaching men religious knowledge, and of training them in religious duties. It is not however to be restricted to this; because the earthly church itself, however imperfect the representation may be, is nevertheless "a pattern of things in the heavens." The church

was organized with reference to nothing else than training them for their future state, to give them such instruction, and to inure them to such habits that they may be fitted for entrance into that state. There is, then, a direct and evident connection between our Lord's kingdom, or church, here on earth, and that kingdom in which He is finally to appear in glory. With this explanation of the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven," let us—

Secondly, direct our attention to "*The Keys*" of that kingdom. With the use of the key we are all familiar. It opens and closes the door, and he who bears it has the means of admitting therein or excluding others therefrom. Thus, then, to the apostles of our Lord, and after them to the Christian ministry in general, was committed the solemn trust of holding the keys of the kingdom of heaven—of admitting or excluding men from a participation in Christian privileges. It is a trust which they are to exercise at their peril. They are indeed left to their own discretion in individual cases, but still rules were laid down for their guidance—rules which may not be violated. They may not exercise an arbitrary judgment, or be guided by their private fancies. Within this kingdom there are privileges which it is important that all men shall enjoy. These privileges are open to all mankind to have the benefit of, unless they forfeit them by misconduct. To exclude one therefrom is to do him a great wrong, unless his own criminal course demands it, as well for his own salvation as for the preservation of the other members of the body which might be corrupted by contact with the diseased part. It may be necessary, then, to exercise this office of excluding men, but it must be exercised under limitations, and with regard to the accountability which is inseparable therefrom.

First of all, then, the apostles of our Lord were charged with *the duty of admitting men into this kingdom*. They were to go forth and preach the truths of the gospel, and to warn men to repent of their sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and as many as did thus repent and believe, they admitted into the

church by Baptism. Thus we see the manner in which remission of sins was effected through the agency of the apostolic office. By this means men were led to the exercise of repentance and belief, which qualifications formed the basis of forgiveness. And on this basis, in the holy sacrament of Baptism, they received the formal assurance of such forgiveness. Baptism is thus a declaration from God that our repentance is accepted by Him. "Repent, and be baptized, every one of you for the remission of sins," said St. Peter on the day of Pentecost. "Arise, and be baptized and wash away thy sins," said Ananias to Saul of Tarsus. It was in this way that the apostles discharged their office in the use of their authority for the forgiveness of sins. Our blessed Lord in the exercise of His ministry had frequently in so many words declared, "Thy sins be forgiven thee." We never read of any one of the apostles making a similar declaration. It was not in them to discern the secrets of men's hearts, and to form a judgment thereupon. They were under the necessity of accepting each man's statement of his own inner experience. They might, indeed, inquire how far his outward conduct corresponded with and confirmed that statement, but behind the veil they could not penetrate. And hence their power of remitting sins was not absolute, but wholly ministerial. It consisted in declaring the terms on which such forgiveness would be granted. Whenever a man professed to have complied with these terms, they were authorized to administer a rite wherein God assured them of such forgiveness, if the profession was honest and sincere. But it was then, and is now, no arbitrary decision of one man for another. The decision and its consequences ordinarily rest with the recipient. It is a matter which he must settle between his own heart and God, who is the Judge of all. The ministerial act consists in declaring in God's name *the terms* on which the forgiveness is sealed.

But it is said, "Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth, shall be loosed in heaven." The explanation already given of the previous clause will also serve to illustrate this. If, through the preaching and ministerial agency of the apostles, men were led heartily to embrace the Gospel, they were loosed from that bondage of sin in which they had hitherto been held. On the contrary, when they rejected the terms which were offered, their chains were riveted more closely than before. And the result then and now, in each individual case, is known and ratified in heaven, whose inhabitants all watch with interest the contest between sin and holiness which is going on here on earth: insomuch that they rejoice over the repentance of the sinner. They mark with interest the effect which is being produced upon men by the preaching of the gospel, for they know full well that men cannot hear its sound, and remain indifferent thereto. If they do not embrace it, they will harden their hearts against it.

It is not to be denied however that the office of binding and loosing embraces the still more responsible duty of deciding judicially upon certain cases, and of administering discipline to offenders. It was found from the very beginning, that some who had professed the Christian name were acting contrary to those principles to which they had sworn allegiance, and were thus recreant to their solemn vows. To place such under suitable restraint and discipline, was and is necessary for their own good, and for the safety of the body at large. And hence this apostolic commission embraces the charge to investigate such cases, and after inquiry, to decide thereupon. If a baptized member of the church is found to have violated all or any of those rules of morality which the New Testament enjoins, then an occasion exists for the exclusion of such an one from Christian privileges until such time as he shall exhibit evidence of repentance and amendment of life. And the just decision of Christ's authorized ambassador, will be ratified and confirmed by the great Head

of the church Himself. It is not intimated, nor is it for a moment to be supposed, that an *unjust* decision will be thus confirmed, or that it will affect unfavorably him upon whom it shall be pronounced, except as it may discourage him from the practice of virtue by a sense of the injustice which has been done him, and by the want of that encouragement which the commendation and approval of others always give. The guilt, whatever it is, will in the unerring judgment of heaven rest where it properly belongs. If a minister of Christ so far degrades his office as to make it an instrument of doing injustice to his fellow-men, of injuring their reputation, of depriving them of the means of grace which our Lord has given us, we may be sure he alone will be answerable therefor. His decision so far from being ratified will recoil upon his own head, and he will bring upon himself the consequence which he thought to have inflicted upon the other.

Thus we see that from the text and kindred passages rightly understood, no warrant whatever is found for that assumption of priestly power which has been claimed therefrom. The idea of private confession and an authoritative Absolution is not found therein. It is not to be denied, however, that it may be a source of comfort to one to tell his griefs to another, and to ask for sympathy and consolation. This is one of the blessings attendant upon the intimacy and friendship which subsists between persons who are attached to each other. They communicate mutually their joys and griefs, and help each other to bear both the one and the other. That man is desolate indeed who has no one to whom he may pour out his soul and receive sympathy. And if the Christian religion did not furnish the occasion for the most pure and uncorrupted friendship, if it did not afford men that sympathy in their sufferings which they so much need, it would fail in one of the most important points wherein religion may be supposed to be valuable. We know that Christianity does furnish the basis for such friendship—and that if worldly friendship has its sweets, that which proceeds

from Christian principle, has a higher element of nobler bliss. Hence reason teaches us that the relation which subsists between the Christian pastor and his people should form the occasion for the closest intimacy. From the very nature of his office, he is their adviser in all matters relating to morals and religion. And the more perfectly he possesses their confidence, the greater influence for good will he be able to exert, the more perfectly will he be able to train them aright. And so too, of all men, the Christian minister would seem to be the one to whom men might express their griefs and look for comfort. Nay, more, when troubled in mind and conscience, whose counsels would be so likely to open the way to relief as his who had been specially appointed by God to declare the terms of forgiveness. I repeat and maintain that the closer the intimacy which subsists between the pastor and his people, the more perfectly they understand each other's feelings and sentiments, the more perfectly will the great object of benefitting their souls and bodies be attained. But this end cannot be reached, and the full benefits derived, unless the members of a church take pains to study and understand the nature of that holy relationship which the pastor sustains to them by divine appointment; viewed seriously and thoughtfully he will not appear in the light of a mere employè, as one of so many officers, but the *minister of God*, clothed with extraordinary functions pertaining to a divine office, and occupying a position which is not to be broken off through mere whim and caprice. Oh, it is a matter for deep regret that in this age of the world, there is so little practical reverence for the office of the ministry, and that consequently much of the work which the minister is sent to perform is hindered and perhaps thwarted.

Let us therefore bear in mind that though our blessed Lord assigned to His apostles and their successors no arbitrary or tyrannical power, yet we are not to rush to the equally false conclusion, that the office committed to their hands, is an unimportant one; that it is of little consequence to us that in

Christ's appointed way we should receive assurance of the remission of sins. These words of our Lord, and the Sacraments with which He connected them, have the same import they had when He first declared them to His chosen Apostles. Time has not altered their meaning, nor lessened their force. And the fact that their true design has been sometimes perverted and abused, does not diminish at all the reasons for their proper use, or render them in any degree the less binding upon us. The Holy Scriptures are the same binding rule of life and conduct to us, as to those to whom they were primarily addressed. The Christian religion in all its parts is of no less consequence to us than to them. And forgiveness of sins must be sought and obtained in the same way—by repentance of our sins, by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, and then by seeking acceptance from Him through the channels of His own appointment. It is not a question upon which we need exercise any philosophical speculations, nor need we trouble ourselves with vain doubts about the efficacy of religious rites. It is not to be supposed that these rites possess any value as unconnected with the inward disposition of the heart. When the minister uses the words of *Absolution*, as they occur in our Church Service, he is but declaring the pardoning mercy of God to those who are truly and humbly penitent. These are the words:

“Almighty God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who desireth not the death of a sinner, but rather that he may turn from his wickedness and live, hath given power and commandment to His ministers, to declare and pronounce to His people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins. He pardoneth and absolveth all those who truly repent, and unfeignedly believe His holy Gospel. Wherefore, let us beseech Him to grant us true repentance, and His Holy Spirit; that those things may please Him, which we do at this present, and that the rest of our life hereafter may be pure and holy; so that

at the last we may come to His eternal joy, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

These words are uttered to *all* who compose the congregation; to the poor and to the rich, to the ignorant and to the learned, to parents and their children, to all who have united in the General Confession of Sin; they are the words of Absolution given by authority, the Minister rising while the people still kneel, but they only, of all the assembled multitude, experience the benefit, comfort, and joy of this declaration who “truly repent and unfeignedly believe God's holy Gospel.” The minister cannot know who are thus penitent; that is known only to the Searcher of hearts. But unto all who acknowledge and bewail their manifold transgressions and implore the divine forgiveness, these words are ratified and confirmed; they receive a pardon at God's hands agreeable to the assurance given by His Minister.

And this is what we understand by “Ministerial Absolution.” More than this we do not claim; less than this we cannot concede. May the great Head of the Church, even Jesus our Master, give us a right judgment in all things; and make us truly penitent, that we may obtain His salvation! *Amen.*